

University Education for Women

*Presidential Address delivered to the Education Society,
Manchester University, on 21st November, 1912*

BY

MRS. HENRY SIDGWICK, Litt.D.

Late Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge

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The Uses of University Education for Women

Presidential Address to the Education Society,
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THE subject on which I propose to address you this afternoon concerns mainly the uses of University Education for women who are not obliged to earn their own living. The use of University Education for women who are intending to take up professions for which University Education directly prepares is of course obvious. But new and more general considerations arise when the question of entering a profession is itself an open one, and for parents at any rate the problems involved are not always easy of solution.

I am not sure that before I begin I ought not to apologise for choosing as the subject of my address one that is perhaps more interesting to myself than to you, and that in some ways concerns parents more than teachers. I have, however, had very little to do with the education of children, no experience of teaching in schools, and hardly any of teaching at all; but, on the other hand, I have, as you know, done a good deal of work in helping to provide educational opportunities for women, and especially opportunities of obtaining University Education, and I have seen a good deal of young women passing through a University, and to some extent have been able to follow their careers afterwards. So reflecting that you would hardly have done me the honour of electing me your president in order to hear from me views on subjects with which many of you are necessarily better acquainted than I am, I will apologise no more for talking about my own subjects, and will at once try to discuss the advantages

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which girls, including those whom parents may reasonably hope to leave independently provided for, may derive from University Education. Incidentally this will lead to some consideration of women's work generally.

To begin with there are obviously two sides to the question. We must examine, on the one hand, what the Universities offer, and, on the other, what women want or ought to want before we can decide how far the two coincide.

John Stuart Mill, speaking of University Education in 1867 in an address at St. Andrews University, which produced a considerable effect at the time, said that a University "is not a place of professional education. Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood. Their object is not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings." If this were strictly true, and if our actual Universities succeeded in any reasonable degree in carrying out this ideal, there could surely be no question that all men and all women whose circumstances made it possible should seek a University Education. It must be right for all to be, as human beings, as capable and cultivated as their opportunities allow.

But it hardly seems that Mill's view of University Education was completely in harmony with the facts even at the time it was put forward; and the development of University Study in the generation and a half that has elapsed since his address was delivered, has been in the opposite direction. At the age at which students now go to the Universities, the necessity of deciding on a profession, if they are to enter one, and of preparing specifically for it has usually come so near them that they cannot reasonably be expected to neglect the need of special preparation for after careers in the pursuit of general culture, and accordingly Universities in these days offer courses specially adopted for doctors, lawyers, engineers, farmers and so forth—not that they usually profess to

turn out the complete professional man, but they aim at giving him the general principles of his branch of work and the knowledge required for an adequate grasp of these principles. The definitely professional aim of University study is somewhat obscured by the fact that for two very important vocations for which University education prepares—that of transmitting knowledge to others either as schoolmasters or mistresses or as University teachers, and that of advancing knowledge—there can be, so far as the acquisition of knowledge goes, no special course. Each student preparing for these careers will follow the path or paths of knowledge in which he hopes to lead others, or which he hopes to carry on further.

That the University is understood to give professional education more than general cultivation appears clearly when the suitability of University education for women is being discussed. For the question is constantly raised, and quite reasonably raised, how far any University course is suited to prepare for the domestic callings, for which so many women are destined. To this question I will return later, but let me first guard against a possible misunderstanding. I do not mean to suggest that the Universities have abandoned or are intending to abandon, the ideal of making their students capable and cultivated human beings. On the contrary, I am glad to believe that this ideal is steadily maintained and even pursued with increasing earnestness and ardour in our Universities, notwithstanding the irresistible tendency to the development of professional studies. I hope that they will never cease to aim at producing that intellectual grasp and width of view which Mill regarded as their chief object. But it is more and more recognised that they have to produce it in most cases, not by teaching to any one individual a wide range of subjects, nor by teaching the same subjects to each individual, but by teaching him in the right manner those which, with a view to his future career, it is especially necessary for him to know. The subjects must be largely selected with a view to

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professional needs, but the spirit in which they are studied by the academic teachers and, under their influence, by the students, may be and should be an essentially liberal spirit. The best teachers are inspired by and endeavour to communicate a love of knowledge for its own sake, and they will never lose sight of the importance of developing the intellectual faculties.

At a University too the student is brought under the influence of other students studying other subjects and especially of teachers in close communication with teachers of other subjects; and more important still he is placed in an atmosphere where the mere acquisition of knowledge is not the sole object, but the advancement of knowledge is an important part of the work of the place. It is in these last respects, perhaps more than in any others, that the University differs from the merely professional or technical college or institution. Hence the student *par excellence*, whose sole aim is knowledge for its own sake without *arrière pensée*—without thought of the use it is to be in enabling its possessor to win prizes, to earn a livelihood, or even to make himself more useful in practical work afterwards—will always be specially valued in a University worthy of its name. Such students are, we may say, a leaven, helping to leaven the whole lump with a truly academic spirit. In this spirit all earnest students may and ought to share, whatever their duties and capacities; but the number of those who can afford to pursue knowledge alone, with entire singleness of aim and concentration of effort, must, from force of circumstances, always be comparatively few.

From this preliminary consideration of what Universities provide let us turn to the other side of the question—what it is that girls want or that we want for them.

Speaking, quite generally, we shall all agree that we want every woman's life to be effective. We want her to be happy herself and to take her full share in making others happy, in helping on the world's work and leaving it if possible a little better than she found it. We should

further all agree, I think, that for most women marriage, provided it is marriage to the right man, offers the best prospect of carrying out our ideal in the most satisfactory manner. But here the difficulties begin. We cannot choose marriage as we choose a profession, and we know that as a matter of fact a great many women, especially in the upper or professional classes, do not marry. It would be beyond the scope of the present paper to enquire why this is so, and any complete answer would involve a somewhat difficult statistical investigation. It is sometimes attributed simply to the surplus female population which, we know from the census, exists. But this will not I think fully account for the number of women who do not marry, and I suspect, though it could only be proved by investigation, that the high standard of living compared with the smallness of many professional incomes, leads men to abstain from marriage. I do not think that disinclination to marriage in the abstract exists to any large extent among women; nor am I inclined to attribute to them any undue reluctance to marry on small incomes.

In any case, whatever the cause, the fact is certain that there is for most young women of the more educated classes, a dual and entirely uncertain outlook—life with marriage on the one hand, and without it on the other—with only a limited power of choice in the matter. It is true that even for those who do marry there is usually an interval of grown-up life to be filled up before marriage, while there is also the possibility of an early and childless widowhood, so that some portion of unmarried life may be looked forward to in almost all cases, but a few years before marriage is of course a very different thing from lifelong spinsterhood. We have to consider then to what extent the same preparation is suitable for both women who marry and those who do not, and this partly depends on what we think women ought to do if they do not marry.

It would now, I think, be generally admitted that parents who cannot leave their daughters a sufficient fortune to secure them comfortable independence would be

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neglecting their duty if they did not provide for placing them in a position to earn their own living. But the mere question of earning a living is not the only one, and it seems to me that all women, including those for whom earning is not a necessity, ought to have an independent career apart from marriage. I think so partly because nothing can be more depressing and demoralising than merely waiting for the marriage which may never come; it is bad for women physically, intellectually and morally; and moreover nothing can be more apt to lead to unhappy marriages than the temptation to marry merely for the sake of a career. But I also think that society has a right to expect that women, unmarried as well as married, should take a share in the work of the world—I am not of course speaking only of work for which the workers are paid, but of useful work of all kinds—and the women themselves have a right to the kind of happiness which can only come from work, and a sense of filling a useful place in the world, and which they cannot have if condemned to the position of mere idle drones.

I suppose that all sensible parents, whether able to leave their sons well off or not, look forward to their doing useful work in the world—either in a profession or in business, or in politics, or in some other way—and endeavour to educate them accordingly. The same view would naturally be taken about girls were it not for the dual outlook of which we have spoken and the different relation of professional work to marriage in the two cases. A man's professional career is not cut short by marriage; indeed his marriage usually makes the earning of money more necessary; but a woman, if she marries, often, perhaps generally, finds it best to give up her profession at least for a time unless she can carry it on in a kind of partnership with her husband, partly because she must adapt her times and places of work to his, and partly because, when babies come, the demands on time and energy made by domestic life are often incompatible with professional work.

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Under these circumstances it is not unnatural that the advantage of serious preparation for professional work, preparation involving expense and effort, should sometimes seem doubtful both to parents and daughters. The expectation of marriage is apt similarly I fear to affect the quality of many women's work in all classes and make it less thorough than men's, for as the future career of women depends on the whole less on the excellence of their work than the future career of men does on theirs, an important stimulus and incentive is absent for women, or at least weakened.

If hesitation to undertake systematic preparation for a career of usefulness were due to reluctance to spend money or to idle love of pleasure alone, it would have little claim on our sympathy. But since for women marriage is itself a kind of profession in a sense which it is not for men, we have to ask whether systematic preparation for a career independent of marriage is a good preparation for marriage. I believe that it is. I do not merely mean that the special preparation for other careers is as likely as anything else to prove a good preparation for married life; though this seems to me eminently true of the preparation for such professions as teaching, medicine, or nursing. I mean also that the qualities, apart from affection, which make a good wife and mother, are mainly moral qualities, or such intellectual qualities as may be cultivated in almost any relation in life—good sense and general intelligence—and which serious and steady preparation for any useful work will certainly aid in developing. It seems to me clear therefore that until she knows she will marry, every woman should consider how her life apart from marriage can be most profitably spent and should prepare herself accordingly, and that in doing so she will be preparing herself to meet the future however it may develop. I am not disposed to draw a distinction in this respect between those women who in order to maintain themselves independently must earn their livelihood, and those who are not under a similar necessity. All should

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equally regard themselves, and be regarded by their parents, as bound to do the best work which their talents, tastes and opportunities fit them for. It follows that the question of going to a University or not, for all who can afford it, should chiefly depend on what that work is to be and whether study at a University is the way to prepare for it.

At this point some of my hearers may wish to raise the question whether in selecting her work a woman of independent means is justified in taking paid work. We do not hear of doubts on this point in the case of men, but they are often expressed in the case of women. There is an assumption that the amount to be earned by women in the aggregate is limited, and that this should be divided not among those who can do the work best, but among those most in need of the money. This is treating women's work as of the nature of relief work. Any portion given to a woman who could live without it is assumed to be taken from those who need it for their daily bread. There is surely confusion here between the problems of production and distribution. If we look at the matter in a broad way we see that all useful work done adds to the wealth of the world. Those who do not work are in effect supported by the rest, and the larger number of idle people there are the less new wealth is there to go round. This is only obscured in the case of persons of so-called independent means by the fact that they are living on the accumulations of previous generations.

No doubt the number of workers needed in some particular field may be limited, and when workers are increasing there may be difficulty for some in finding work till new fields are opened. If, for example, the demand for teachers were to cease expanding, the profession might become overstocked. But teaching is highly skilled work and work requiring for its highest development special talents. It is for the world's advantage that those best fitted for the work should enter the profession, and this cannot be determined by a poverty qualification. It

lowers any profession if it is entered with no motive but gaining money, and this must tend to happen if only those who need money are allowed to enter it or stay in it. No one would push the theory so far as to say that a woman with literary genius should refrain from writing or publishing if she had enough to live on without doing so. This would be too obviously absurd. The hollowness of the theory can also be shown by applying it to the case of men. Take the case of salaries to members of the House of Commons which that House has recently decided to pay. Would any of us say that it was wrong for a man to offer himself for election if he did not need the salary? On the contrary, we say that the possibility of his seeking election for the sake of the money is a danger for the community which needed very serious consideration in deciding to pay salaries at all.

I conjecture that the scruple felt by women about taking paid work belongs to a transition state out of which we are passing but have not yet quite passed. The idea of any woman of the professional classes working for pay except in cases of extreme necessity is comparatively new, in this country at least. In old days those who did not marry were supported by their relations, and only when this support failed did they seek paid work, for which they had often had no preparation and were not at all well qualified. The work was taken as a *pis aller*—a refuge for the destitute. The teaching of girls and young children was very apt to fall into the hands of such unqualified women because there were so few well qualified. As through the growth of public opinion under the influence of pioneers like Miss Buss, Miss Beale, Miss Clough, Miss Davies, both the dignity of work and the unsatisfactory state of girls' education and the need of better qualified teachers came to be recognised, girls began to prepare for the profession. It inevitably followed that the unfortunates without qualification for the work though in great need of the pay were thrown out in competition. The tragedy of this is not yet over, and I think still influences

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people's feelings. For many, who would probably seek for the best qualified person for any post with which they were themselves concerned, the need of the pay overshadows the importance of the work when they are thinking of the effect of competition apart from any particular post.

It should be remembered in connection with this question that the increased dignity of a profession entered for its own sake and not solely for pecuniary gain is advantageous to all who are in it. We all know from old novels how different from what it is now was the position of teachers in the days when for a lady born in comfortable circumstances to become one was usually a sign of failure.

I think therefore most emphatically that there should be no difficulty felt about a woman of independent means taking paid work if it is the work she most desires or feels most fitted for. She will, however, of course thus become responsible for the spending of a larger income and will have to consider how it should be used. In a way in fact by earning she sets free her independent income.

But I must guard myself from possible misunderstanding in one respect. It is not, I think, right for a woman to compete in the open market and take less than the market price, enabled to do so by an allowance from her parents. That is not fair competition, and it tempts the employer to accept possibly inferior work because he can get it cheap. Well-to-do women are sometimes accused of acting thus. I am not sure that it really happens, but I am sure it would be undesirable that it should. We must, however, distinguish between taking paid work for less than the standard wage and taking work that is unpaid altogether, or from the nature of the case can only be partly paid. There is much important unpaid work to be done, and a good deal of work of a philanthropic kind, which is of course only open to those who have at least some means of their own. For those capable of it there is also much pioneer work to be done—work which, like Florence Nightingale's, alters the world's ideals—or which, like Mrs. Garrett Anderson's, makes new open-

ings for women, or work like Miss Clough's in starting a new institution. Pioneer work requires as a rule not only enterprise and ability but capital, at least in the sense of power to wait for remuneration, and therefore must be done by those with some means of their own, either alone or in combination with others. Girls with independent means have therefore a larger choice of work than those who are limited to immediately remunerative occupations and a larger choice carries with it a greater responsibility in choosing.

There is another kind of work for women which must not be left out of account or underrated, I mean home work apart from marriage. There are many homes which have a reasonable claim on a girl's time and energies even at some sacrifice of her own future. There are often gaps in domestic life which can best be filled by the unmarried girls or women of the family—help wanted in the care of old people and children and invalids, or in making the work of other members of the family go smoothly. This kind of work can best be done by women, not only because they are generally better adapted to it, but because if any sacrifice of a future career is involved, it will neither be so certain nor so great in the case of a woman, as it would generally be in the case of a man. Only (and this I say chiefly to mothers) in encouraging any girl to devote herself entirely to home work, let us count the cost and compare it with the gain. Do not let us ask her to give up the chance of filling or preparing herself to fill a more useful place in the world for the sake of employing her—as mothers are, I think, sometimes tempted to do—in trivial social duties from which she might be spared with little loss to anyone.

A girl's choice of occupations then may be limited by distinct calls of duty, as well as by other circumstances; but what I am urging is that the talents and opportunities—taking talents in the widest sense of the word—which nature has given her are a trust to be used conscientiously for the benefit of the world, and that consequently she

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should have such opportunity as her parents can afford her of developing her capabilities.

This brings us back to the University. The University is primarily the place for those whose tastes and capabilities are of the intellectual or studious order, or who desire to take up work for which academic study is a necessary preliminary. Those who wish to take up professions for which the Universities prepare—in the case of women chiefly teaching and medicine—will of course if possible go to a University. Those who wish to take up social and philanthropic or administrative work in which economic problems occur, or in which historical or theological or scientific knowledge may be useful, will often find University education of direct value; and there are other employments for which the Universities offer at least part of the preparation required. But we need not restrict ourselves to these strictly utilitarian considerations. Speaking generally the women who should be encouraged to go to Universities are those who, whatever future lies before them, have marked intellectual tastes, or are capable of developing them,—those who most desire to learn for learning's sake. A quotation from a student's letter written at the end of her first term not very long ago will show the attitude of mind I have in view. "I must repeat again," she says, "how I loved my first term and what a revelation it has been to me, having inspired me with irresistible longings to read, learn and inwardly digest. I feel as if the scales had fallen from my eyes at last and I see long avenues before me which I may tread and be aided in that journey." This girl I may say had a professional aim in view though I believe it was not in her case a pecuniary necessity, but she had caught the right spirit, the love of knowledge for its own sake and apart from its examinational and professional value, and whether she practises her profession or not she will have profited by her University education. Among women of this sort will be found a few who will add to our literary stores, and a few who will help in advancing knowledge by

reflection, observation, experiment, or research, or—more humbly—by rendering accessible the work of others. Those who advance knowledge will not probably be many—there are not many among men—but the others if they have been really interested will not have wasted their time; they will have increased their power of enjoyment, they will have received a training which will directly or indirectly help them in any work they may undertake, and they will form part of the audience—the cultivated, interested and intelligent public—without which scientific progress and literary production is well nigh impossible.

It must be borne in mind too, that a good deal of the work open to educated women—voluntary as well as paid work—cannot be entered on very young, so that there is a period of waiting after school is over to be profitably filled up. For studious women a University course is likely to be a very profitable way of utilising this time even when it does not exactly directly prepare for the future work, for it develops the powers of the mind, cultivates habits of application and thoroughness and enlarges the mental outlook—all of which things are valuable in all positions.

These advantages, however, are limited to the studious. Personally I should not recommend a woman who did not wish to study to go to a University. It is done sometimes in the case of men. Parents sometimes send their sons to the Universities, especially the older Universities, knowing, or at least suspecting, that they will not work seriously, merely to pass the time happily and under a certain amount of supervision while waiting for the moment when they can enter a profession. I doubt whether this is good for men. I am sure it would not be good for women. If a girl wishes to spend her time in amusement she had better do so at home under the eye of her mother. To take up a life which professes to have study as its main object and not to work is futile and demoralising and certainly not a good preparation for anything.

But returning to the dual outlook, in the case of women

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even granting that any serious preparation for work is a useful preliminary to marriage or home life generally, there still remain points in relation to marriage to be considered. As I said it is in a sense a profession for women and part of the business of a married woman is usually to manage a house. We may therefore ask whether a University education prepares her directly for this. Again agreeing that a happy marriage is the happiest career for a woman, it is reasonable to ask whether University education effects the probability of marriage either favourably or unfavourably.

To this second question I can give no clear answer. I think the considerations are so mixed and so impossible to estimate that the safest plan is to assume that they balance one another and that we need not take account of the question at all. I do not think a University education disinclines a woman for marriage, and I do think a cultivated mind and developed intelligence is likely to make her a better companion for a man similarly endowed, and a better guide and helper for her children. And I know many happy marriages exemplifying this. On the other hand any development of her faculties is likely to give a woman a higher standard and therefore to some extent to make her less likely to find the man she can care for among the men she happens to be thrown with. But this of course is one of the ways in which the chance of ill-assorted marriages is diminished. Looking at the matter again from the point of view of the men—some seem to be most attracted by women unlike themselves, and some by those of similar tastes; some like frivolous and doll-like women, and imagine they will prefer them as wives; others may prefer women developed on the practical rather than the intellectual side, but others again will like those who can sympathise with or supplement their own intellectual tastes. Altogether it seems safest I think to let each individual of either sex train the capacities nature has endowed him or her with and hope that circumstances will bring together those who ought to marry.

With regard to the housekeeping question, there are of course home arts which every woman who is going to manage a house will require, and a University is not likely to be the best place in which to learn these. Girls with good mothers can probably acquire them at home, and some help in this direction is to be had at most good schools now while there are technical schools and classes where women can take short courses after they know that they will have a house to manage. Even after marriage there may be time for this, for a young married woman whose husband is out all day and who does not do the manual work of her house herself is rather apt to have too much time on her hands. I do not think therefore that all women, irrespective of what they are likely to do afterwards, should be urged to spend time in adult life on acquiring domestic arts which they may not need, to the detriment of training in other things. But anyone with special tastes and abilities in this direction may well go into the matter thoroughly and make herself a really good cook or laundress or dressmaker. With practical training of this kind based on a good University education in, say, science, a woman, married or unmarried, would find many spheres of usefulness open to her, for it is, I think, generally admitted that there is considerable room for improvement in the average English housekeeping in all classes both as to efficiency and economy. University women should be able to effect improvement here, for the want of a scientific habit of mind and of habits of thorough work are often at the bottom of the failure. But the Universities—at least the older ones—are not the places to go to for direct training in the domestic arts, and I hardly think they ought to be, at least at present.

In what I have said so far there is one aspect of University education on which I have hardly touched, but on which I should like to say a few words before I conclude, as it has too important a bearing on our subject to be omitted. I mean the aspect of it as it is or should be seen from inside by the students who are going through it.

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This aspect will not of course be the same for all students, and to a great extent it will be for each one very much what she makes it for herself. The proverbial difficulty of making the individual drink, after being led to the well springs of knowledge and intellectual culture, is a difficulty that the best organisations cannot overcome. But, making every allowance for the defects of human beings and human institutions, I think that the students who have the intellectual tastes and trained faculties which fit them for academic study may, if they are not below the average in seriousness of aim and steadiness of purpose, expect to find in University life a period happy while it lasts and a cause of happiness afterwards, both through its memories and its results. This happiness springs from various sources. One of these, and for many not the least valued, is the opportunity it affords for intimate friendship and social converse, the play of sympathy in work and relaxation; but on this I will not dwell, because, though University life is certainly rich in such opportunities, they may, happily, be also found elsewhere.

I will rather dwell on two gifts—one moral and one intellectual—which it is, I think, a special privilege of the University to bestow on those who will imbibe its spirit and surrender themselves to its influence. The moral quality is easy to feel, but somewhat difficult to express. May I call it the sense of membership of a worthy community, with a high and noble function in which every member can take part, and at the same time not so vast in extent as to reduce the individual to insignificance; a community whose larger life seems to grow into and expand the narrower life of the individual members, gently constraining them to wider interests and more strenuous activities, and by self-forgiveness which it makes easy and natural, relieving the stress of personal anxieties without imposing any sacrifice of legitimate self-regard.

The intellectual gift I may describe as the habit of reasonable self-dependence in thought and study, to what-

ever end thought and study may be directed. I call it reasonable self-dependence, partly to contrast it with the uncritical acceptance of new ideas—if impressively conveyed and hitting the reader's fancy—to which even persons of strong intellectual interests are liable, if they are given over to miscellaneous reading without ever having made a thorough study of anything and thus learnt the kind of labour and care and precision of thought that is required to arrive at sound conclusions in any department. But I equally wish to distinguish it from the undue self-confidence and sweeping dogmatism sometimes seen in persons who have really mastered one subject well, but have never, by living and learning among students who are studying other subjects, imbibed an adequate sense of the limits of their knowledge and its relation to other parts of the vast system of modern science and learning. This reasonable self-dependence is not, of course acquired at once; it has to come by degrees. Most students are during their University course turning from school boys or girls into young men or women. At school, if they have been conscientious, they have been working steadily at their appointed tasks, acquiring the knowledge set before them; but their minds must necessarily have been mainly receptive, and they have seen largely through their teachers' eyes. At the University they will still of course, rely on their teachers but from their teachers they will gradually learn to rely on themselves. They will learn not only to read books, but to use them, to combine the observations and reasoning of others with observations and reasoning of their own; to know how their little knowledge shades off on all sides into ignorance, and in what way on any side it may be extended if need arises and opportunity is allowed. I do not say that this faculty cannot be acquired elsewhere than at a University, but I do say that it is learnt far more easily from a group of teachers who are thinking for themselves and advancing as well as imparting knowledge, than it can be learnt by solitary study. The solitary student will sometimes over-

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rate himself and sometimes underrate himself; the former error is morally the more objectionable, but the latter is intellectually speaking, no less to be avoided. To know where one is, intellectually, what one can do and what one cannot do,—this knowledge is of inestimable value for life. No institution can be relied on to impart it; but I know no institution that can do so much to aid women, as well as men, to learn it as a University that is doing its duty.

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